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Collective action hinders the increase in post-election trust among election losers: Longitudinal evidence from the 2024 UK election

Gaëlle Marinthe^{1*}, Fanny Lalot^{2*}, Alice Kasper³, Efisio Manunta⁴, & Genavee Brown⁵

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¹LAPSCO, Université Clermont Auvergne, CNRS, France; ²Faculty of Psychology, University of Basel, Switzerland; ³Institute for Research in the Psychological Sciences, Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium; ⁴CLLE, Université de Toulouse, CNRS, France; ⁵Department of Psychology, Northumbria University, United Kingdom. *Indicates authors contributed equally. *Please address correspondence to Gaëlle Marinthe, gaelle.marinthe@uca.fr, LAPSCO, Université Clermont Auvergne, CNRS, 34 av. Carnot 63037 Clermont-Ferrand Cedex, France. This article is published under the Creative Commons BY 4.0 license. Users are allowed to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format, so long as attribution is given to the creator.

Political trust is a key component of civic investment in democratic societies. However, the reasons for its fluctuations within the democratic process remain insufficiently understood. This study investigated longitudinal associations between electoral outcome, political collective action, and political trust. We hypothesized that collective action would moderate the impact of election results, such that trust would increase among engaged individuals whose preferred party won, but decrease among those whose preferred party lost. Using longitudinal data collected before and after the 2024 UK General Election ($N = 543$), we found a general increase in political trust following the election. This increase was weaker, although still significant, among participants who supported losing parties. Furthermore, we observed an interaction between collective action and *local* electoral outcome: Political trust increased for all participants except those who had greatly invested in collective action *and* whose local candidate had not been elected as Member of Parliament. These findings confirm that electoral processes foster political trust, but also suggest that unsuccessful collective action may hinder the typical increase in political trust following an election. They highlight the importance of both institutionalized and non-institutionalized political engagement in shaping trust, with implications for understanding how democratic participation can strengthen—or undermine—support for the political system.

Keywords: collective action, elections, longitudinal, political trust, winner-loser gap

1. INTRODUCTION

Political trust is a cornerstone of democratic life. It fosters citizen engagement and participation in democratic processes, particularly elections (e.g., Carstens, 2023). Interestingly, not only does trust play a role in election turnout and outcome, elections can also in turn influence citizens' levels of political trust (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Hooghe & Stiers, 2016). Some findings suggest that trust increases when one's preferred side wins and decreases when one's preferred side loses in the aftermath of an election (e.g., Anderson & LoTempio, 2002; Craig et al., 2006; Dahlberg & Linde, 2017). However, others show that this relationship is more complex and may be moderated by different factors—such as perceived incivility (e.g., Kuru & Neyazi, 2025) or populist attitudes (e.g., Fahey et al., 2022).

Beyond the mere action of voting, another critical dimension of democratic engagement involves non-institutionalized, bottom-up initiatives such as political collective action. While most of the literature has focused on the *antecedents* of collective action (e.g., relative deprivation, agency, group identification, see Becker & Tausch, 2015, for a review), some recent studies have turned to its *consequences*. For example, Louis and colleagues (2020) showed that participating in successful collective action fosters engagement in future, related collective action. Overall, however, not much is known about the broader political consequences of engaging in collective action, nor about how collective action engagement interacts with institutionalized processes like elections in shaping political trust.

In the present study, we bridge these literatures by investigating how prior engagement in political collective action moderates changes in political trust in the aftermath of a General Election, depending on whether the election outcome is favorable or unfavorable to the voter (i.e., “winner” or “loser”). Our research thus contributes to understanding the conditions under which democratic institutions and

processes themselves are related to trust. Across Europe, democracies are facing mounting pressure, as voter turnout falls and authoritarian as well as far-right forces gain ground. These trends fuel concerns about public disengagement and an erosion of trust in democratic institutions (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Valgarðsson et al., 2025). In contrast, as a response to future-oriented anxiety arising from multiple crises, some citizens—particularly younger generations—may become more politically engaged and more supportive of democratic principles (Borghi et al., 2025). In this current context, the present study's endeavor to understand alternative levers or inhibitors of trust, specifically institutionalized and non-institutionalized political engagement, might prove crucial.

1.1 Political Trust and its Determinants

1.1.1 Political Trust: A Critical Issue in Democratic Systems

Political trust broadly refers to the confidence people have in their government and the extent to which they see their government as trustworthy and competent (Carstens, 2023; Levi & Stoker, 2000; Zmerli & Hooghe, 2013). As such, it is conceived as an evaluative attitude held by a citizen toward their political system or agents, with several components contributing to the overall evaluation, notably, technical competence or success, ethical and fair conduct, and perceived congruence with citizens' best interests (Bertsou, 2019; Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Devine et al., 2021; PytlikZillig & Kimbrough, 2016). Political trust is thus a critical component in the functioning of democracies, serving as a bridge between individual trust in political actors and broader support for democratic systems (Easton, 1965; Zmerli, 2022). Although political trust can be directed toward various objects (e.g., parties, politicians, institutions), research shows that these attitudes are often strongly correlated, forming a relatively coherent construct (Hooghe, 2011).

Political trust has long been recognized as a pillar of democratic systems, fostering support at

the behavioral, attitudinal, and ideological levels. Among other things, it relates to greater civic investment, likelihood to vote, and support for democracy as an ideology (e.g., Dalton, 2004; Devine, 2024; Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Lee & Schachter, 2019; Marien & Hooghe, 2011; Tyler, 2001, 2006). Conversely, contexts marked by low political trust face higher difficulties in enacting policies (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Devine, 2024; Thaker et al., 2019). They also witness greater polarization, with citizens becoming more entrenched in their ideological stances and less willing to compromise (Bergbower & Allen, 2021). Low political trust is also related to the rise of populism (Castanho Silva et al., 2017) and extremism (Devine, 2024; Van Der Meer, 2017).

Once lost, trust is difficult to restore (Citrin & Green, 1986; Hetherington, 1998). Indeed, political trust has been on the decline for decades in most Western countries (Carstens, 2023; Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Dassonneville & McAllister, 2021)—or at best, stagnating at low levels (Devine & Valgarðsson, 2024). It is therefore of utmost importance to understand how political trust evolves, to better predict and foster people's engagement in civic life, either through institutionalized (e.g., vote) or non-institutionalized, bottom-up routes (e.g., collective action). Importantly, however, the question of how political trust is shaped by those outcomes themselves has largely been overlooked.

1.1.2 The Impact of the Electoral Process on Political Trust

The electoral process may affect political trust in several ways. First, the mere existence of an electoral and voting process seems to increase trust (Hooghe & Stiers, 2016), probably due to an increased perception of procedural justice (i.e., the perception that political decisions are made in a fair, transparent, and impartial manner; Bos et al., 2014; Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Gulevich et al., 2024). In addition, some research highlights that the outcome of the election may play a role, although evidence is not

consistent. Specifically, some research reports an increase in political trust following a win (vs. a loss) of the election (Anderson & LoTempio, 2002; Blais & Gélinau, 2007; Craig et al., 2006; Dahlberg & Linde, 2017).

However, this winner-loser effect may be moderated by prior characteristics of individuals. For example, Fahey and colleagues (2022) showed that individuals with stronger populist orientation distrust the government, whatever the outcome of the election. Ismail and Jia (2025) also found that voters with a stronger national attachment more readily accept a defeat in the elections and express greater willingness to cooperate (a proxy for trust) with the winning party. In line with these recent findings, we propose that prior political engagement (conceptualized as engagement in election-related collective action) may moderate the change in political trust in the aftermath of winning (vs. losing) an election.

1.2 Collective Action and Its Potential Role in Political Trust

Political collective action—defined as “any action undertaken by individuals as psychological group members to achieve group goals in a political context” (van Zomeren, 2016, p. 89)—represents an alternative form of civic engagement, complementary to institutionalized engagement such as voting. The antecedents of collective action have been extensively studied in the social and political psychology literature. Prominent models, such as the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (van Zomeren, 2013; van Zomeren et al., 2008, 2018) emphasize predictors of participation including social (especially politicized) identity, anger, collective efficacy, and moral outrage. Yet, research on the consequences of such actions remain scarce, and virtually none have examined their broader implications for trust in the political system.

Previous research has examined how political trust may affect collective action. Such studies tend to demonstrate the absence of a direct effect of political trust on collective action in Western, democratic countries (Devine, 2024;

Thaker et al., 2019; Uysal et al., 2025). We examine this question from the opposite direction, and propose that collective action interacts with the election outcome in its association with changes in political trust (pre- to post-election).

Two main arguments support our claim: the first focusing on what happens when collective action is successful and the second focusing on what happens when collective action is unsuccessful. First, as briefly mentioned above, recent research has examined the impact of successful or unsuccessful collective action and suggests that success increases the likelihood of sustained action (Louis et al., 2020). Indeed, the success of collective action unifies the movement (Lizzio-Wilson et al., 2021), increases pride (Tausch & Becker, 2013) and feelings of empowerment (Bandura, 1997; Reicher, 2017), and enhances perceptions of collective efficacy (Carvacho et al., 2023)—all factors that foster further collective action. Success may also help recruit individuals who were not previously engaged (Lizzio-Wilson et al., 2021; van de Rijt et al., 2016). We contend that successful political collective action (i.e., collective action taken in order to help one's candidate win the election) would therefore be related to increased interest and engagement in the broader political context (Kim, 2015). This could support the perception of a functional political system that allows citizen initiatives to emerge and develop—thus being ultimately related to increased political trust.

The second part of our argument relies on work concerning procedural justice perceptions which show what happens when collective action is not successful (Shejale et al., 2025). Prior research in sociology has shown that participation in pro-immigration collective action reduces political trust via diminished perceptions of procedural justice (Toubøl, 2019). Importantly, this negative impact is implicitly believed to result from collective action's failure. Experiences of failed collective action may undermine the belief that the political system is

responsive to citizen input and thus lead to disengagement with traditional political systems (Otjes et al., 2020; Pirralha, 2017), thereby weakening political trust. Consequently, engagement in political collective action may be associated with reduced political trust following an election outcome that is unfavorable to the voter, which would suggest unsuccessful collective action.

In summary, we propose that the association between election outcomes and political trust may be moderated by prior engagement in collective action. Specifically, while winning may be related to reinforced political trust among engaged citizens, losing after an active investment may show the opposite relationship. In democratic contexts, civic engagement may therefore play an amplifying role: It would be positively related to political trust when aligned with favorable outcomes but also negatively related when expectations are unmet.

1.3 The Present Study

1.3.1 The UK General Election

Our research was conducted in the United Kingdom, during the most recent 2024 General Election. The UK indeed offers an instructive case. As in most democratic countries (Valgarðsson et al., 2025), political trust has been on the decline in the UK over the past few decades, especially in the aftermath of Brexit (2016) and the COVID-19 pandemic (2021-2023; see Davies et al., 2021). These events were marked by political controversies (e.g., “Partygate” gatherings by government officials in violation of lockdown rules) that likely further eroded public confidence in political leaders and the political system. In addition, the UK had a decrease in voter turnout over the past two general elections with only 60% of voters mobilizing in 2024, the lowest since 2001 (Sturge, 2024).

In the UK, the party that receives the most seats in Parliament in the House of Commons picks the Prime Minister from among its ranks. There are 650 Members of Parliament (MPs), elected from constituencies delineated by

geographical locations, each constituency being made up of an average of 90,000 people. The UK uses a First-past-the-post electoral system, meaning that the candidate with the most votes in each constituency wins the seat. This system can create a discrepancy between local and national outcomes: A voter's preferred local candidate may win their seat, but if that candidate's party does not secure enough seats nationally, it cannot form a government and will instead serve in opposition.

The 2024 election was marked by the return to power of the Labour party, after 14 years of Conservative leadership (Baker et al., 2025). Labour won the majority of seats (411), representing an increase of 209 seats compared with the 2019 General Election. In contrast, Conservative Party lost a substantial number of seats, falling from 365 in 2019 to 121 in 2024. The third major party was the Liberal Democrats, who won 72 seats (i.e., 61 more than in 2019). Other notable parties included Reform UK (5 seats) and the Green Party (4 seats). As a result, the Labour leader, Keir Starmer, was elected Prime Minister.

1.3.2 Hypotheses

We investigate how institutionalized and collective investment in the 2024 UK General Election is associated with political trust depending on the perceived effectiveness of this investment, which we conceptualize as the outcome of the election. We expect that winning (vs. losing) the election will be related to increased political trust (after vs. before the election), but that this increase will be moderated by prior investment in political collective action. Specifically, we expect a stronger winner-losing gap in the increase in political trust among individuals who were more actively engaged in collective action prior to the General Election. Put differently, we expect that collective action will be related to an increased level of political trust

when winning, but to a decreased level of trust when losing.

To test these hypotheses, we rely on a survey of political views of UK respondents around the 2024 UK General Election. For our secondary data analysis, we categorized respondents as being on the 'winner' versus 'loser' side as a function of the success of the party they voted for. Further, we distinguished between outcomes at the national level (i.e., whether one's preferred party won the most seats) and at the local level (i.e., whether one's preferred candidate was elected as MP, regardless of the national result). Indeed, proximity may also play a role in how citizens perceive and engage in political matters (see Abrams et al., 2021), although the question of whether local versus national election outcomes have different associations with political trust remains largely unexplored. We therefore used these two levels of outcome to examine whether they relate differently to political trust.

This secondary analysis was preregistered¹: <https://aspredicted.org/jcZh-74hm.pdf>. The research was approved by the ethics committee of the School of Psychology of the University of Kent. Data, codebook (including materials), and code for analysis are available on the OSF: <https://osf.io/y7qf4/>.

2. METHOD

2.1 Participants and Procedure

UK citizens were recruited through the crowdsourcing platform Prolific and invited to participate in an online study on their political views in the context of the General Election. Participants were pre-screened on the basis of their intended vote to be approximately representative of the four main parties running in the election: Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, and Reform UK. They completed a first questionnaire four days before the 2024 General Election and a second questionnaire

¹ At the time of preregistration, only one author of the current project had access to the data and only shared it with the rest of the team after preregistration. None of the authors had examined the key variables or tested the hypotheses of the present research prior to preregistration.

one week after the election. This was a large survey that included several measures which pertain to different research questions and are not discussed here. A list of the other measures is available upon request.

Six hundred and five participants completed the first questionnaire. Following pre-registered exclusion criteria, the final sample size was $N = 543$ for analyses involving national election outcome (national sample, see Figure 1). This sample was composed of 159 Labour, 167 Conservative, 90 Liberal Democrats, 117 Reform UK, and 10 Green voters. There were 235 men, 303 women, 4 non-binary or other, and 1 undisclosed, with a mean age of 48.33 ($SD = 14.38$). The sample size was based on initial feasibility and budget constraints. A post hoc sensitivity analysis based on the model specifications and parameters showed that it provided 80% power to detect a three-way interaction as small as .046 (*powerSim* package, Luedicke, 2013; 1000 simulations).

Because 76 participants did not indicate their constituency, we could not retain them for the analyses involving local election outcome and they were then excluded for the local level analyses (see Figure 1). This “local” sample was composed of 140 Labour, 143 Conservative, 80 Liberal Democrats, 97 Reform UK, and 7 Green voters. There were 203 men, 260 women, 3 non-binary or other, and 1 undisclosed, with a mean age of 48.04 ($SD = 14.43$).

2.2 Measures

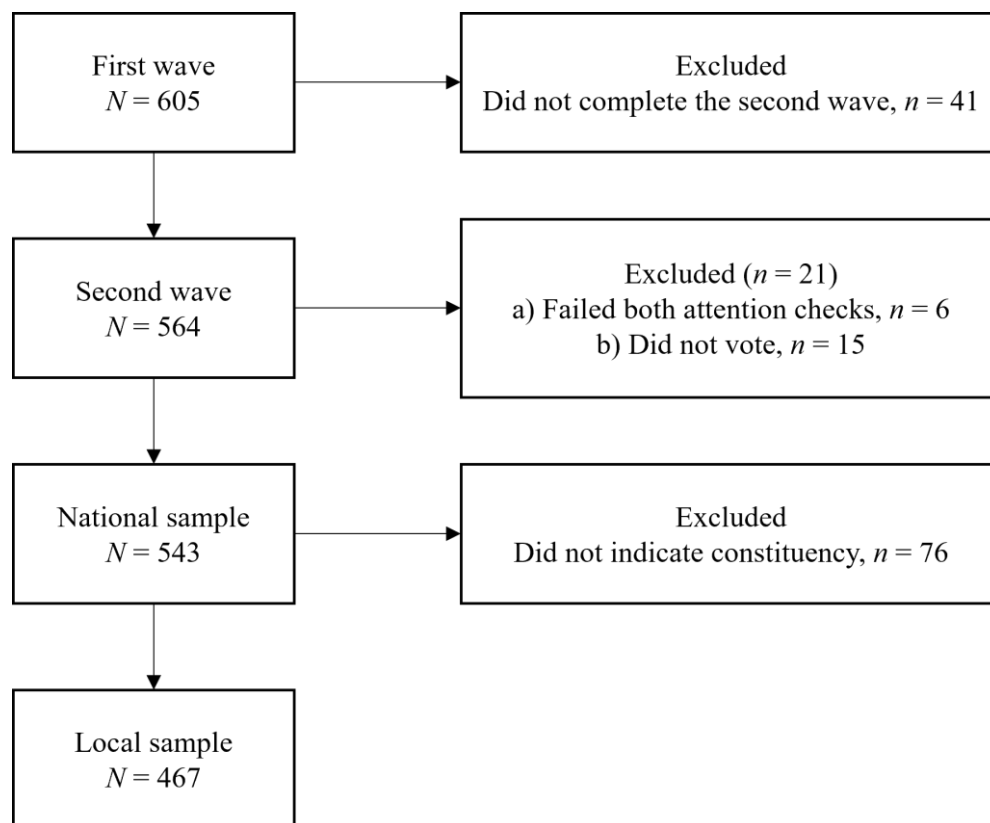
2.2.1 Collective Action Engagement

The pre-election questionnaire included a checklist that measured how many different collective actions, if any, participants had engaged in the context of the General Election. Specifically, the item read, “This short section is about different things people do to express their views on things like government policies, society, the environment around election times. Please indicate which, if any, of the following activities you have done during the past month in preparation for the General Election

specifically.” Participants could tick “Yes, I have”, for each of 12 actions. These actions comprised 11 political collective action (e.g., “signed a petition”, “joined a political party”) and one filler item (“Watched a TV discussion about the election”) which we planned not to count as collective action. There was also an option to report an “other” action in an open text field. We initially conducted a content analysis on these answers ($n = 6$) and coded them as collective action (e.g., “Signed up to support and receive party material”; $n = 3$) or not (e.g., “Listened to radio discussions about the election”; $n = 3$).

We then conducted an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) based on tetrachoric correlation matrix (see details in Supplementary Material, Section 2). A one-factor solution was found acceptable, and the analysis confirmed the filler item should be removed ($\lambda = .40$, $h^2 = .16$). The “other” item was also excluded due to its low contribution ($\lambda = .31$, $h^2 = .09$). An EFA on the remaining 11 items showed an adequate one-factor structure, with loadings ranging from .44 to .80, and satisfactory communalities ($h^2 = .20$ to .65). Reliability was excellent ($\alpha = .86$, $\omega = .87$).

We thus computed a sum score representing the number of different actions that people had engaged in, theoretically ranging 0–11 ($M = 0.51$, $SD = 0.98$). The majority of participants did not engage in any action ($n = 383$), whereas the remaining participants ($n = 160$) engaged in between one and eight actions (see Supplementary Material, Section 2, for the full distribution).

Figure 1*Exclusion Criteria for National and Local Samples*

Note. No participant failed both attention checks in the first wave. At Time 1, the two attention checks were: “For this question please select the answer that says Africa” (1 = *Europe*, 2 = *North America*, 3 = *Africa*, 4 = *South America*, 5 = *Oceania*) and “For this question please tick moderately better” (1 = *Much worse*, 2 = *Moderately worse*, 3 = *Slightly worse*, 4 = *About the same*, 5 = *Slightly better*, 6 = *Moderately better*, 7 = *Much better*). At Time 2 the two attention checks read: “For this statement please tick strongly agree” (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Somewhat disagree*, 4 = *Neither agree nor disagree*, 5 = *Somewhat agree*, 6 = *Agree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*) and “For this question please tick moderately better” (1 = *Much worse*, 2 = *Moderately worse*, 3 = *Slightly worse*, 4 = *About the same*, 5 = *Slightly better*, 6 = *Moderately better*, 7 = *Much better*).

2.2.2 Election Outcome

We categorized respondents as being on the 'winner' vs. 'loser' side as a function of success of the party they voted for. At the national level, we thus categorized Labour voters as 'winners' ($n = 159$) and all others as 'losers' ($n = 384$).

Because proximity may play a role in how citizens perceive and engage in political matters, we also considered results at the local level. We categorized voters as 'winner' ($n = 182$) or 'loser' ($n = 283$) depending on local results (i.e., who had been elected as MP in the participant's constituency).

2.2.3 Dependent Measure: Political Trust

Political trust was measured both in the pre- and post-election questionnaire, and time was considered as a predicting factor in analysis. The questionnaire contained nine items measuring political trust, all measured using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*). We initially preregistered that we would only consider two items to measure political trust ("UK politicians are mainly in politics for their own benefit and not for the benefit of the community"; "It does not really make much difference which political party is in power in the UK"). However, those items proved to be only moderately correlated ($r = .31$ pre-election, $r = .29$ post-election). As we preregistered we may use alternative measures of trust present in the questionnaire (i.e., measures of trust in politicians in general, in Members of Parliament, in one's local council, and in one's political party), we ran separate EFAs on all nine political trust items for pre-election (Time 1) and post-election (Time 2) data. EFAs were conducted using minimum residual extraction, oblimin rotation, and the number of factors was determined based on the Kaiser criterion and scree plot.

Both EFA yielded a two-factor solution that was consistent across waves (see Table 1). The first factor, which we labeled "Political system trust", was composed of six items, including one reversed item. The second factor,

representing ingroup party trust, was composed of two items. A final item ("It does not really make much difference which political party is in power in the UK") did not load on either factor when considering loadings $> .40$ (e.g., Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019).

At Time 1, the two factors explained 55% of the total variance and were moderately correlated ($r = .40$). At Time 2, the two factors explained 60% of the variance with a similar moderated correlation ($r = .45$). The pattern of loadings and communalities indicates that the six-item scale for global political trust and the two-item ingroup party trust factor are coherent and reliable across waves (see Table 1).

Importantly, the one item that did not load on any factor was initially part of the pre-registered measure, together with the first item. We therefore decided to deviate from pre-registration (as anticipated therein) and retain the six items comprising Factor 1 as our measure of political trust. This political trust scale demonstrated excellent reliability, both pre- ($\alpha = .89$, $\omega = .89$) and post-election ($\alpha = .91$, $\omega = .91$).

In addition, we conducted a longitudinal measurement invariance analysis of the six-item construct suggested by the EFAs (Davidov et al., 2014; Mackinnon et al., 2022; see Supplemental Material, Section 1). This analysis showed strong evidence for configural and metric invariance and partial evidence for scalar invariance. This means that the expected factorial structures are coherent with a six-item model across waves, and that variations in the latent score correspond to comparable variations in items' answers across waves. Thus, we consider that this version of the scale fits invariance requirements to be used as a dependent variable across waves in this study.

Table 1*Exploratory Factor Analysis on Items of Political Trust*

Item	Pre-election				Post-election			
	Factor	Factor	h^2	u^2	Factor	Factor	h^2	u^2
	1	2			1	2		
UK politicians are mainly in politics for their own benefit and not for the benefit of the community	-0.69	0.02	0.47	0.53	-0.71	0.04	0.48	0.52
It does not really make much difference which political party is in power in the UK	-0.17	-0.29	0.15	0.85	-0.21	-0.26	0.16	0.84
Most members of the UK parliament can be trusted to defend the interests of their constituents	0.76	-0.04	0.56	0.44	0.87	-0.05	0.73	0.27
Most members of the UK parliament are honest	0.85	-0.07	0.68	0.32	0.87	-0.05	0.72	0.28
How much do you trust or distrust... The UK Parliament	0.80	0.03	0.65	0.35	0.85	0.05	0.77	0.23
Your local council (i.e., town or city or district)	0.54	0.09	0.34	0.66	0.59	0.05	0.38	0.62
Politicians in general	0.88	0.06	0.82	0.18	0.86	0.06	0.80	0.20
The political party with which you identify more strongly (or that best represents your views)	0.02	0.93	0.87	0.13	0.00	1.00	1.00	- 0.001
Leader of one's political party ^a	-0.06	0.63	0.37	0.63	0.01	0.63	0.41	0.59
% of variance explained	39	15			44	17		

Note. Loadings > .40 are reported in bold.

^a Score attributed to the leader congruent with the participant's vote (i.e., Rishi Sunak for Conservative, Keir Starmer for Labour, etc.). Participants evaluate their trust for the four main leaders with the following instruction: "How much do you trust or distrust the following political leaders? Rishi Sunak (leader of the Conservative party); Keir Starmer (leader of the Labour party); Ed Davey (leader of the Liberal Democrats); Nigel Farage (leader of Reform UK).

For transparency purposes we also conducted the analyses initially planned (i.e., 2-item measure). Those are reported in Supplementary Material (Section 4; see also footnotes in results section). Further, the analysis considering in-group party trust (i.e., Factor 2 of our EFA; correlation between the two items was .57 at Time 1 and .64 at Time 2) is also described in Supplementary Material (Section 5).

2.3 Analytic Strategy

All analyses were conducted using linear mixed-effects models fitted with the *lme4* (Bates et al., 2015), *lmerTest* (Kuznetsova et al., 2017) and *parameters* (Lüdtke et al., 2020) packages in R (version 4.2.1; R Core Team, 2022). The dependent variable was political trust. Fixed effects included election outcome (−1 = failure, 1 = success), time (−1 = pre-election, 1 = post-election), collective action (standardized), and their interactions. Participants were included as a random intercept to account for repeated measures across time:

Trust ~ Outcome * Time * Collective action + (1 | ID)

Degrees of freedom and standard errors were computed using the Satterthwaite approximation (via *lmerTest*), and the models were estimated using restricted maximum likelihood (REML). This approach appropriately models repeated observations while avoiding overparameterization given the two time points per participant. We therefore retained a random-intercept-only structure, which provided a more stable and parsimonious model and aligned with our focus of testing hypotheses on fixed effects (Barr, 2013).

Residual diagnostics using the *DHARMa* package (Hartig, 2025) indicated that both national and local models were adequate, with only a minor deviation in the national model associated with the election outcome variable (see

Supplementary Material, Section 3). For both the national and local models, including covariates (gender, age, and national British identification) did not affect the results. Therefore, we report the more parsimonious analyses without covariates in the main manuscript, while analyses including covariates are presented in Supplementary Material (Section 6). Additionally, because the samples used for the national and local-level analyses differed (see Figure 1), we repeated the national-level analyses using the smaller “local” dataset (see Supplementary Material, Section 7). The results were similar regardless of whether the national or local dataset was used.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Role of the General Election Outcome at the National Level

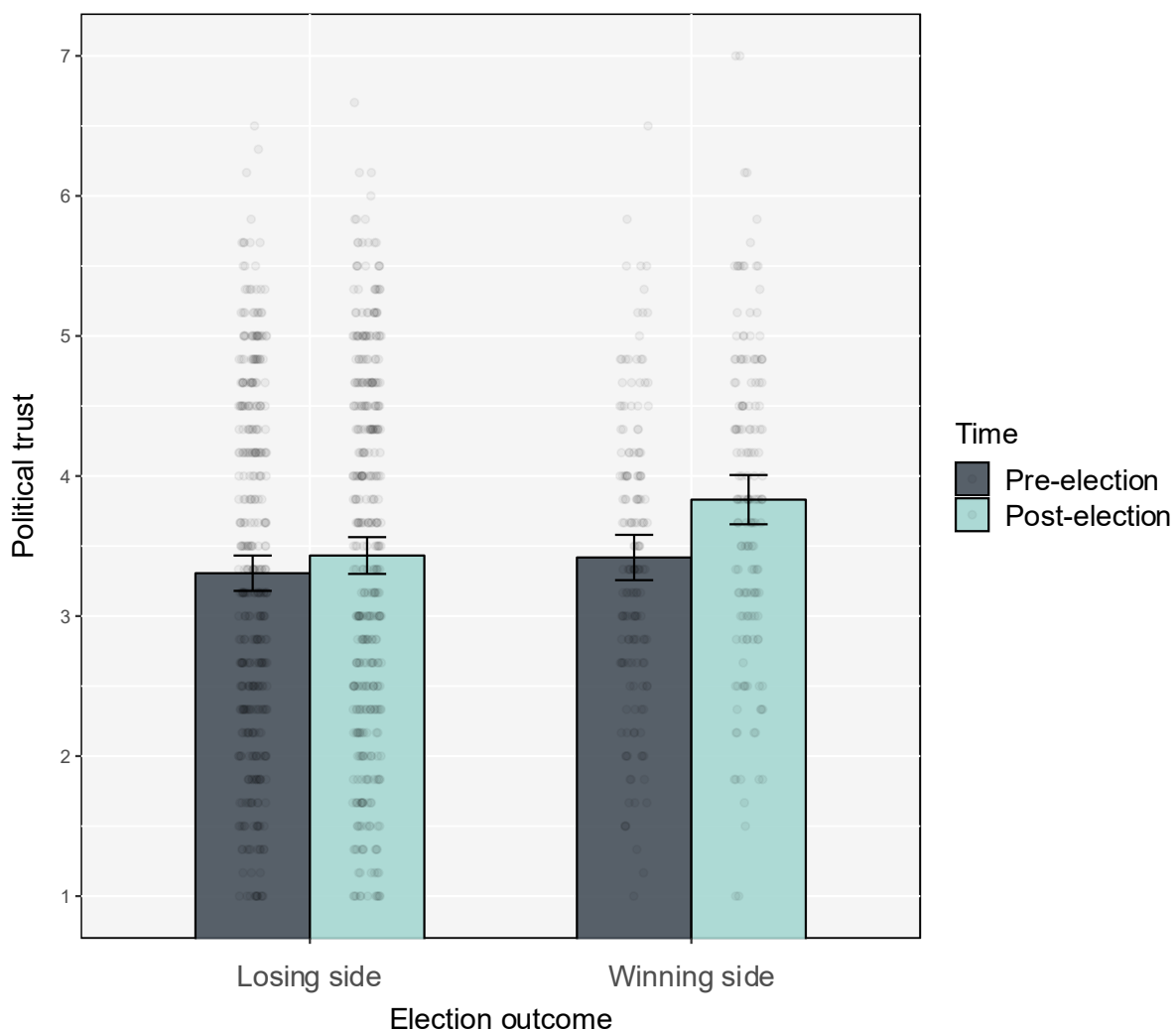
We conducted a mixed model regressing political trust on time (within-subject; −1 = pre-election vs. +1 = post-election), election outcome (between-subject; −1 = losing vs. +1 = winning), and collective action (z-score).²

Full results are reported in Table 2. The analysis yielded a significant main effect of time on political trust, with higher levels observed post-election compared to pre-election. This difference was qualified by a significant interaction with the national outcome of the election (see Figure 2). Specifically, while political trust increased in both groups, the increase was significantly stronger among winners (i.e., Labour voters), $b = 0.42$, $SE = 0.05$, $\beta = .34$, 95% CI [.25, .42], $t(539) = 7.58$, $p < .001$, than among those who voted for losing parties, $b = 0.13$, $SE = 0.04$, $\beta = .10$, 95% CI [.05, .16], $t(539) = 3.56$, $p < .001$. Put differently, trust levels did not differ between Labour voters and others before the election, $b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.12$, $\beta = .08$, 95% CI [−.10, .27], $t(631) = 0.91$, $p = .366$. However, the difference became significant after the election, with Labour voters

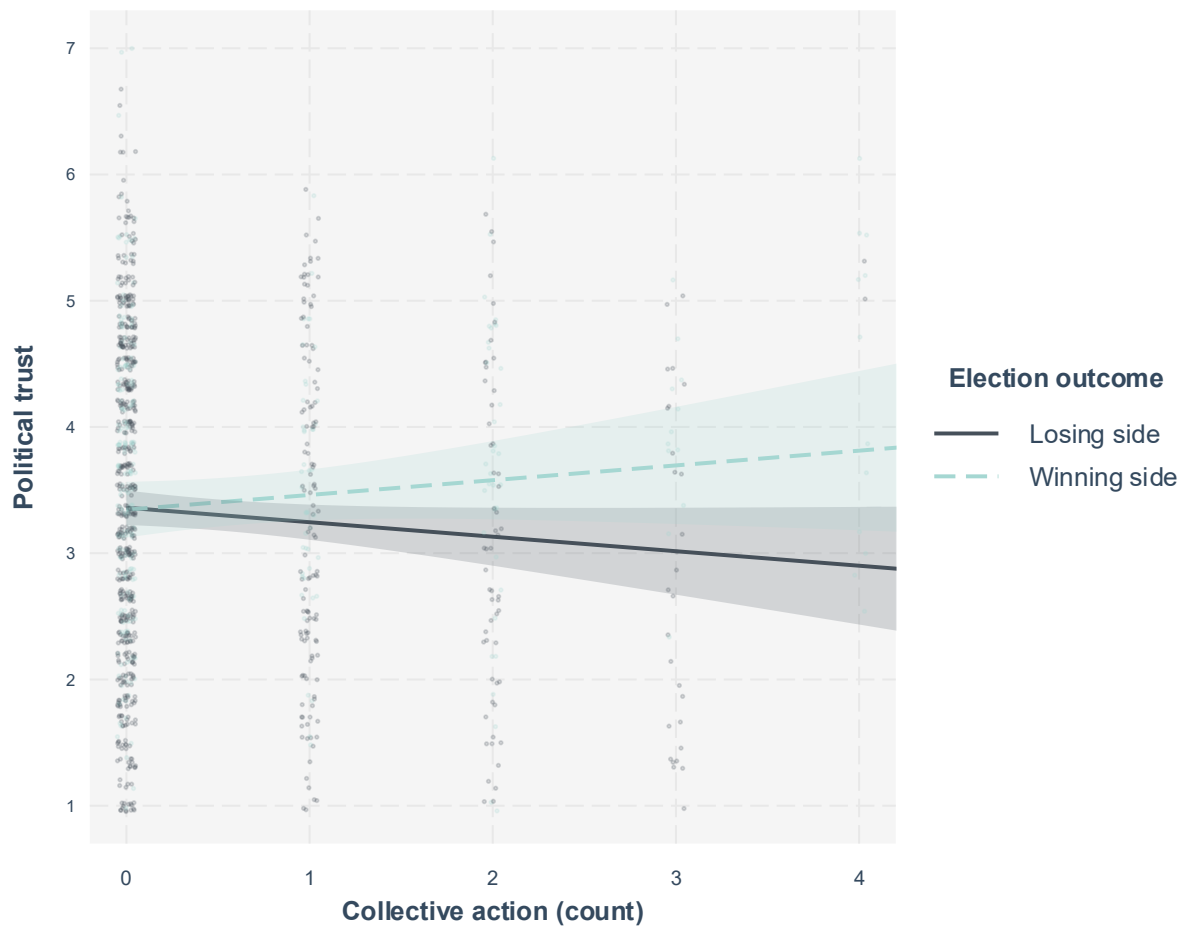
² We also conducted the analyses using the pre-registered measure of trust (see Supplementary Material, Section 4). Although the overall patterns are broadly consistent with the results presented in the manuscript, the Outcome × Time interaction was only marginally significant ($p = .061$), potentially because of a pre-election difference between Labour and non-Labour voters.

Table 2*Results of the Mixed Model with National Election Outcome*

Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	95% CI		<i>t</i> (539)	<i>p</i>
Election outcome	0.13	0.06	.10	.01	.19	2.26	.024
Time	0.14	0.02	.11	.08	.14	8.30	<.001
Collective action	-0.02	0.05	-.02	-.10	.07	-0.35	.728
Outcome × Time	0.07	0.02	.06	.03	.08	4.47	<.001
Outcome × Collective action	0.12	0.05	.10	.01	.18	2.28	.023
Collective action × Time	-0.01	0.02	-.01	-.04	.01	-0.89	.375
Outcome × Collective action × Time	0.001	0.02	.001	-.02	.03	0.05	.963

Figure 2*Political Trust as a Function of Time and National Outcome of the Election*

Note. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals. Political trust is measured on a 7-point Likert scale.

Figure 3*Political Trust as a Function of Collective Action and National Outcome of the Election*

Note. Political trust is measured on a 7-point Likert scale. Collective action ranges 0-8 in our sample; however, as only three participants reported between five and eight actions, we cropped the figure at a value of four (see Supplementary Material, Section 2, for details).

expressing higher political trust, $b = 0.40$, $SE = 0.12$, $\beta = .32$, 95% CI [.14, .50], $t(631) = 3.42$, $p < .001$.

Further, we observed an interaction effect between collective action and election outcome (understood here as party affiliation, given the absence of a time effect; Figure 3). Among Labour voters, there was no significant relationship between collective action and political trust, $b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.09$, $\beta = .08$, 95% CI [-.05, .22], $t(539) = 1.19$, $p = .235$. In contrast, among non-Labour voters, collective action was negatively associated with political trust, $b = -0.14$, $SE = 0.06$, $\beta = -.11$, 95% CI [-.21, -.01], $t(539) = -2.24$, $p = .025$.

In spite of these two two-way interactions, the hypothesized three-way interaction was not significant. In other words, while trust increased more among election winners (Labour) than among election losers (all other parties), this effect was *not* moderated by collective action engagement—although collective action showed a link to trust that depends on political party but not time.

As robustness checks, we replicated the analysis with collective action as a dichotomous score (no collective action vs. at least one collective action; see Supplementary Material, Section 8). To account for the fact that some actions are more costly and less frequent than others, we also replicated this analysis with a Rasch score, which takes item difficulty into account. The interaction between outcome and time remained significant in both analyses. The interaction between outcome and collective action remained significant for the Rasch score and was marginally significant for the dichotomous score, although the simple effects were similar.

3.2 Role of the General Election Outcome at the Local Level

In a second analysis, we turned to the local level, examining whether the local victory or defeat of one's MP candidate would interact

with collective action to predict changes in trust levels. We tested a similar model, now considering the *local* outcome of the election (-1 = local candidate losing vs. $+1$ = winning; see Table 3 for full results).³

Similar to what we observed with the national outcome, the general increase in political trust post-election was moderated by the election outcome: The increase was greater among those whose preferred local candidate won, $b = 0.33$, $SE = 0.05$, $\beta = .27$, 95% CI [.19, .35], $t(463) = 6.35$, $p < .001$, compared to those whose candidate lost, $b = 0.13$, $SE = 0.04$, $\beta = .11$, 95% CI [.04, .17], $t(463) = 3.15$, $p = .002$.

Second and most interestingly, the hypothesized three-way interaction was now significant (see Figure 4). Specifically, while political trust generally increased post-election, this was not the case for individuals who had engaged in political collective action prior to the election *and* whose preferred local candidate lost. For the latter, there was no difference in trust between the pre- and post-election time (see Table 4). Put differently, there was no pre-election difference in trust between voters. However, post-election, among those who had engaged in more collective action, individuals whose preferred candidate won expressed higher levels of political trust than those whose preferred candidate lost (see Table 5).

As before, for robustness checks we replicated the analysis using the dichotomous score of collective action (no collective action vs. at least one collective action; see Supplementary Material, Section 8) and the Rasch score of collective action (see Supplementary Material, Section 9). The three-way interaction became non-significant when considering the dichotomous score ($p = .178$), which suggests that the increasing amount of engagement matters more for our pattern of results than a mere engagement vs. non-engagement dichotomy. The interaction was slightly reduced ($p = .052$) when using the

³ We conducted the same analysis using the pre-registered 2-item measure of trust. The three-way interaction was only marginally significant ($p = .089$; see Supplementary Material, Section 4).

Table 3*Results of the Mixed Model with Local Election Outcome*

Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	95% CI		<i>t</i> (463)	<i>p</i>
Local outcome	0.17	0.06	.13	.05	.22	2.99	.003
Time	0.12	0.02	.09	.07	.12	6.93	<.001
Collective action	-0.03	0.05	-.03	-.11	.06	-0.58	.559
Local outcome × Time	0.05	0.02	.04	.01	.07	3.00	.003
Local outcome × Collective action	0.07	0.05	.06	-.03	.14	1.29	.197
Collective action × Time	-0.01	0.02	-.01	-.04	.02	-0.65	.519
Local outcome × Collective action × Time	0.04	0.02	.03	.004	.06	2.27	.023

Table 4*Simple Effect of Time (T2-T1) According to Local Outcome of the Election and Collective Action*

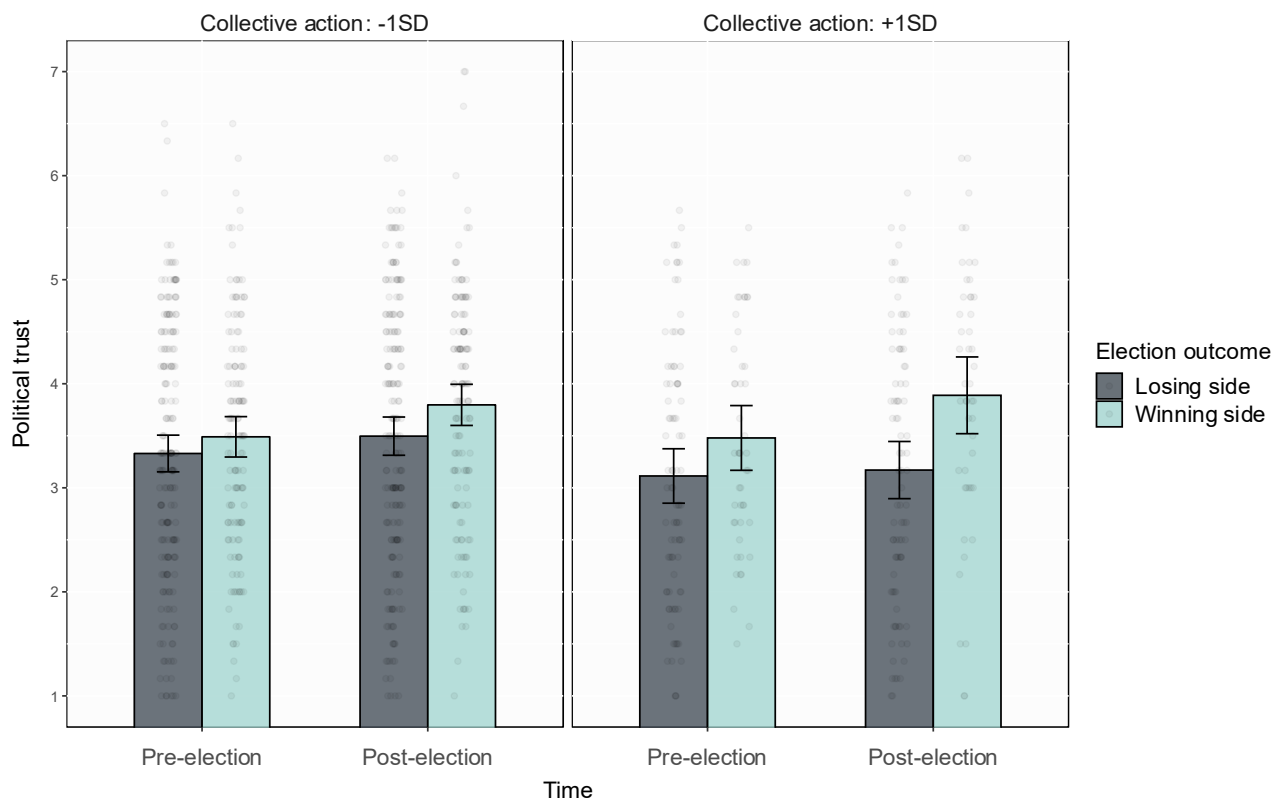
Collective action	Local outcome	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	95% CI		<i>t</i> (463)	<i>p</i>
-1 <i>SD</i>	Losing	0.23	0.06	.18	.06	.31	3.68	.002
	Winning	0.28	0.07	.23	.08	.37	3.96	.001
Mean	Losing	0.13	0.04	.11	.02	.19	3.15	.010
	Winning	0.33	0.05	.27	.16	.38	6.35	<.001
+1 <i>SD</i>	Losing	0.04	0.06	.03	-.10	.16	0.58	.937
	Winning	0.39	0.07	.31	.17	.46	5.46	<.001

Table 5*Simple Effect of Local Outcome of the Election (Winning - Losing) According to Time and Collective Action*

Time	Collective action	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	95% CI		<i>t</i> (547)	<i>p</i>
Pre-election	-1 <i>SD</i>	0.17	0.16	.13	-.20	.47	1.02	.737
	Mean	0.23	0.12	.19	-.06	.43	1.99	.193
	+1 <i>SD</i>	0.30	0.16	.24	-.10	.58	1.83	.262
Post-election	-1 <i>SD</i>	0.22	0.16	.18	-.16	.51	1.34	.535
	Mean	0.43	0.12	.35	.11	.59	3.73	.001
	+1 <i>SD</i>	0.65	0.16	.52	.19	.86	3.99	<.001

Figure 4

Political Trust as a Function of Time, Local Outcome of the Election, and Collective Action



Rasch score. However, it is important to stress that in both cases the simple effects remain similar to those obtained in the main analysis.

4. GENERAL DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine how collective action relates to changes in political trust post-election, taking into account the outcome of the election. We relied on longitudinal survey data collected during the 2024 UK General Election and assessed changes in trust in the UK political system from before to after the election.

4.1 Collective Action Hinders the General Increase in Political Trust Following Local Electoral Defeat

Our results align with the existing literature suggesting that electoral processes in democratic and representative systems foster political trust (Hooghe & Stiers, 2016). Specifically, we found an overall increase in political trust following the General Election. Interestingly, this increase was moderated by the electoral outcome: Increase in trust was higher among participants who supported the winning side / diminished among those who supported the losing side(s). Nonetheless, the increase in trust was significant in both groups. This suggests that even losing an election does not entirely negate the trust-enhancing effects of participating in a democratic process, possibly due to increased perceptions of procedural justice (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Gulevich et al., 2024)—although the exact process remains, here, speculative. Importantly, we observed a consistent role of election outcomes at both the national level (i.e., whether participants voted for the winning party) and the local level (i.e., whether the candidate they voted for was elected as MP). Interestingly, Lalot and Abrams (2025) found that, in the same election, voters' willingness to forgive political leaders for past trust violations increased after the election. While voters showed an ingroup bias, expressing greater willingness to forgive their own leader in general, forgiveness increased to a similar extent for in- and outgroup leaders from before to

after the election—an effect that mirrors the increase in trust reported in the present paper. This may indicate a general motivation from both election winners and losers to “reach across the aisle” and focus on the future of the superordinate group (i.e., the nation).

More crucially, we found partial support for our hypothesized interaction between collective action and election outcomes in their association with increased political trust (pre- to post-election). This moderating effect was significant only with election outcomes at the local level. Specifically, the general increase in political trust was *not* significant among individuals who had invested in collective action and whose preferred local candidate lost. Contrary to our expectations, we did not find the reverse effect—that is, no significantly stronger increase in trust among those who had invested and whose local candidate had won. Rather, our results suggest that collective political engagement amplifies the psychological cost of defeat: Individuals who invested in collective action and experienced electoral failure at the local level did not benefit from the general increase in trust typically associated with participation in a democratic election. These findings thus resonate with those reported by Toubøl (2019), who observed a negative impact of collective action on political trust, but also call for a more nuanced interpretation. Our results suggest indeed that this relationship may be moderated by the perceived outcome of the collective action, particularly whether it is seen as successful or not. Interestingly, the three-way interaction involving a dichotomous score of collective action did not reach significance, suggesting that only substantial engagement, rather than minimal engagement is related to political trust. In other words, it appears that the amount of engagement, rather than mere participation, is key in understanding post-election political trust among election losers.

4.2 Implications

These findings are relevant for the collective action literature. They suggest that investment in

political collective action may affect political trust if the outcome is unfavorable, ultimately undermining support for the democratic political system, a possibility largely overlooked to date. Indeed, most of the literature has focused on understanding and fostering engagement in collective action but has rarely considered the potential negative downstream consequences. The present research contributes to bridging this gap.

One could argue that those who unsuccessfully invested in collective action are few and therefore not relevant. Against this argument, we believe instead that those individuals are important to study. Indeed, it is likely they belong or contribute to mobilizing minority movements, i.e., they are those who both care about the future of the group and perceive a normative conflict (minority dissent; see Packer, 2008). Such individuals strive for a collective amelioration of grievances and may drive societal change (Moscovici, 1980; Wood et al., 1994). Understanding when they lose faith in the system is therefore of crucial importance.

Further, our findings suggest that individuals interpret the success or failure of collective action in relation to more proximal, tangible outcomes. Local elections may be perceived as more directly influenced by one's collective action efforts and thus more relevant to evaluating the effectiveness of civic engagement and the collective efficacy that results from collective action investment (Carvacho et al., 2023; Lalot & Abrams, *in press*; Van Stekelenburg et al., 2016).

4.3 Limitations, Constraints on Generality, and Avenues for Future Research

Our study addresses an important question for democratic life and provides real-world evidence regarding the under-examined relationship between collective action, electoral outcomes, and political trust. However, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, we focused on a rather general measure of political trust that encompasses politicians

in general, members of Parliament, and local council, which should therefore capture a broad sense of trust in and support for the political system (Zmerli, 2022). However, we did not consider other specific institutions (e.g., justice system, Murtin et al., 2018; science, e.g., Marinthe et al., 2024) that could also account for trust in the system and help maintain healthy societies, especially in the context of the current crisis of democracy. It will be useful for future research to also consider other political actors and to assess whether similar dynamics can be observed.

Another point of caution is the overall low level of engagement in political collective action observed in our study. We used an additive scale measuring actual behaviors (rather than intentions, which may show greater variance) among average citizens—who are, by definition, generally less engaged than political activists. Although this type of measure is common in the collective action literature (e.g., Lubell et al., 2007), alternative additive scales using a broader range of response options (e.g., “never,” “once or twice,” “more than twice”; Richey, 2023) may increase variability between participants. As mentioned above, we believe it is important to study those engaged individuals who strive for societal change. It would thus be important for future studies to consider different populations (e.g., political activists) to assess whether the associations we observed replicate among individuals with greater variation in high levels of collective action engagement.

In addition, although collective actions were measured in relation to the preparation of the election, we were not able to statistically demonstrate a causal impact on political trust. Future research could examine whether these associations hold by adopting an experimental design or a longitudinal design including more than two waves. Such longitudinal designs would allow researchers to distinguish intraindividual from interindividual variations (i.e., through random-intercept cross-lagged panel models) and thus provide stronger evidence for

causality.

Longer time frames would also allow researchers to determine whether post-election fluctuations in trust are temporary or long-lasting. There is a current debate as to whether political trust shapes and crystallizes in adolescence on the basis of early-life experiences, and thereafter only shows temporal fluctuations (e.g., Devine & Valgarðsson, 2024; Krosnick & Alwin, 1989), or whether political experiences in adulthood, including collective action engagement, continue to durably shape trust (Sivesind et al., 2013). The present data can only speak of short-term fluctuations and more work is needed to determine how trust is influenced in the long run.

Further, although we speculate that our findings may be explained by perceptions of procedural justice (Citrin & Stoker, 2018), we did not directly measure this construct. Future research should examine the underlying mechanisms—particularly regarding the impact of collective action on political trust—to provide a clearer understanding of the processes involved. Doing so would also inform communication strategies that might prevent losses in political trust following democratic elections. Future studies may also examine potential interindividual moderators that make some people more or less sensitive to the success or failure of the actions in which they had engaged.

Our findings are necessarily context-specific as the study was conducted during a single national election in the United Kingdom. Although we believe our findings may generalize to other multiparty democratic systems, political institutions vary significantly across countries. Structural variables such as the degree of electoral representativeness or the number of political parties (Marien, 2011), and the size of the polity (Stockemer, 2017) could influence the observed dynamics. Furthermore, in authoritarian contexts, the relationship between collective action and political trust may differ substantially (Acar & Uluğ, 2021; Chan et al., 2023; Gulliver et al., 2022). Future studies should

therefore test these hypotheses in a wider range of political systems, including both diverse democratic and authoritarian regimes.

5. CONCLUSION

Across Europe, democratic systems are under increasing strain, marked by declining electoral participation and the growing influence of authoritarian and far-right movements. These trends raise concerns about citizens' disengagement and the gradual erosion of trust in democratic institutions (Fieschi & Heywood, 2004; Ionescu et al., 2021). The United Kingdom provides a particularly illustrative case: The "Partygate" scandal and years of political instability have undermined institutional credibility and contributed to voter disillusionment. The 2024 General Election represented both a political turning point and an opportunity to examine the psychological mechanisms that sustain or weaken citizens' political trust.

Consistent with previous research, we observed a general increase in trust following the election; yet this effect depended on how individuals experienced participation and the electoral outcome. Citizens who both participated actively and supported winning candidates tended to report higher post-election trust, suggesting that democratic success reinforces perceptions of efficacy and legitimacy. In contrast, when collective action efforts failed to achieve the desired outcome (i.e., such as when participants supported a losing local candidate), this could be associated with weaker engagement with democratic processes.

Our research is among the few studies to demonstrate that collective action is associated with support for the political system depending on the perceived success of participation. These findings advance our understanding of how both institutionalized and non-institutionalized forms of civic engagement are linked to political trust and extend the literature on the broader possible consequences of collective action for democratic life. Crucially, identifying these psychological determinants is essential

for developing strategies that preserve perceptions of procedural fairness and institutional legitimacy across all segments of the population.

Overall, our results highlight the importance of both institutionalized and non-institutionalized political engagement as interacting predictors of trust, with implications for understanding how democratic participation is related to strengthened support for the political system or, when expectations are unmet, undermine citizens' commitment to democratic governance.

6. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no competing interests.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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8. DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data, codebook (including materials), and code for analysis are available on the OSF: <https://osf.io/y7qf4/>

9. SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The supplementary materials can be found [here](#).

10. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

GM: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing - Original Draft, Visualization, Project administration. FL: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Investigation, Data Curation, Writing - Original Draft, Visualization, Project administration. AK: Conceptualization, Writing - Review & Editing. EM: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing - Review & Editing. GB: Conceptualization, Writing - Original Draft.

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